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AUTHOR Stein, Mary Kay
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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade the idea that schools should serve as professional learning communities for teachers has become fashionable. Discussions of "community" pervade the literature on professional development and teacher learning. The three case studies conducted as part of the first-year work on the High Performance Learning Communities Project provide some specific answers to the questions of what it means for a school to serve as a professional learning community for teachers. These studies were conducted in schools which experienced dramatic turnarounds in the past eight years from elementary schools where children were not learning, staff were not teaching, and parents were uninterested to schools with improving student achievement score, dedicated and cohesive teaching staffs, and supportive, involved parents. This paper seeks to explicate the strategies that were used in the case study schools to create and maintain professional learning communities. One overriding similarity was that all three schools were active participants in Community School District #2's overall systemic approach to improvement. Indeed, the decision to intensively study these particular schools was guided by district leaders' beliefs that each had embraced and benefited from the direction, advice, and support provided by the district. As such, the district's hand can be discerned in the cultures of all three schools. As the strategies used by these schools are identified and described, district influences will be noted and elaborated upon. (NKA)

High Performance Learning Communities
District 2
Report on Year One
Implementation of School
Learning Communities

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March 1998

Learning

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

HIGH PERFORMANCE LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

L R D C

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Mary Kay Stein

Schools as Professional Learning Communities

Over the past decade, the idea that schools should serve as professional learning communities for teachers has become fashionable. Discussions of "community" pervade the literature on professional development and teacher learning. But what does it mean for a school to serve as a professional learning community for teachers? And how does a school go from a demoralized, nine-to-three culture to a professional learning community in which teachers work together to hone their practice and accept shared responsibility for student learning?

The three case studies conducted as part of the first-year work on the High Performance Learning Communities Project provide some specific answers to these questions. These studies were conducted in schools which experienced dramatic turnarounds in the past eight years—going from elementary schools in which children were not learning, staff were not teaching, and parents were disinterested to schools with improving student achievement scores, dedicated and cohesive teaching staffs, and supportive, involved parents. The purpose of this paper is to explicate the strategies that were used in the three case-study schools to create and maintain professional learning communities.

There were many commonalties and some differences in the paths taken to community by these three schools. One overriding similarity, however, was that all three schools were active participants in Community School District #2's overall systemic approach to improvement. Indeed, the decision to intensively study these particular schools was guided by district leaders' beliefs that each had embraced and benefited from the direction, advice, and support provided by the district. As such, the "hand of the district" can be discerned in the cultures of all three schools. As the strategies used by these schools are identified and described, district influences will be noted and elaborated upon.

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The literature on professional learning communities is replete with descriptions of the characteristics of professional learning communities (Loucks-Horsley, 1995; Louis & Kruse, 1995) and/or frameworks for analyzing school cultures (Little, in press; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). Much less has been written about how a professional learning community can become *established* in a school in which none has previously existed. Yet, this is precisely the condition of most public schools today: teachers work in isolation from their peers and without access to outside expertise, they have little sense of a shared mission or common identity, and their professional learning opportunities are unrelated to their daily working lives.

Ten years ago, the above description would have fit the three case-study schools. Since that time, however, each has been transformed into a professional learning community characterized by shared values, a common commitment to the learning of all students, and norms of continuous learning by all. In each school, the turnaround began with the appointment of a new principal by Superintendent Alvarado. As part of a wave of new appointments, these principals were keenly aware of the important positions that they were being hired to play in the district's strategy for systemic reform. As the mediators between the ideas of district leaders and the actual teaching and learning occurring in classrooms, principals were viewed as linchpins in the district's ambitious, broad-based strategy (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Although each of the case study principals was hand-picked from a different position within the district,[1] they shared one important characteristic: they all began their work with a multi-year commitment to this challenging task.

While sharing a strong sense of commitment, each principal developed a distinctive style of leadership. One principal assumed a very assertive, persistent, and tenacious style, including an involvement in instruction that was extremely direct and highly visible. A second principal was equally committed to instructional issues, but was more of a behind-the-scenes facilitator. She worked closely with building-based staff developers to nourish promising teachers and identify weak teachers in need of a change. Displaying a style that she herself termed "shared leadership," this principal's key strength was the development of a culture of trust and openness. The third principal gained much of his authority, respect, and, ultimately, his effectiveness, from his deep knowledge of and acceptance by

the neighborhood community and teaching staff. He exhibited a strong talent for obtaining the support and backing of crucial constituencies for the implementation of needed reforms.

Despite different leadership styles, a review of these three principals' early initiatives reveals five common strategies for seeding community: establishing and maintaining a clear, unwavering instructional focus; opening instructional practice; investing in the development of teacher capacity-building; controlling community membership; and establishing a community-based identity.

Focus

> If you start with instruction, you can work your way to community.
> If you go after community, you may never get to instruction.
> [paraphrase of comment made by district leaders]

Soon after their appointments, each of the three principals delivered an extremely clear message to their teachers, staff, parents, and students: our school's mission is about one thing and one thing only: student learning. As such, the principals noted, all effort and activity would be centered on the improvement of instructional practice; communication around non-instructional issues was expected to be kept to a minimum. The principals reinforced this message through their talk and actions.

But the definition of focus did not stop there. In all three cases, the principals further defined their school's focus as assuring that each child could read and write. Sharpening their focus to the teaching and learning of literacy proved to be a highly effective move because it led to an intensification of teachers' sense of mission, an increase in resource allocation devoted to accomplishing that mission, and a streamlining of the areas to which teachers felt compelled to devote energy and cognitive resources.

This approach to creating community is different from traditional forms of community building and professional development which often begin with efforts to build interpersonal relationships and, belatedly, if at all, come to grips with the teaching-and-learning issues that lie at the heart of educational work. Not only did these three schools start with instruction-and-learning issues, but they did so in a content-specific way. A bonus of this content-driven approach was the avoidance of "generic" forms of professional development (e.g., cooperative group work, assertive discipline), thereby forcing teachers deeply into

substantive issues from the start. With literacy forming the nucleus of their work, consideration of issues of classroom management and organization could be entertained *as they related to core academic tasks* rather than driving the professional development agenda in and of themselves.

The schools' early embrace of a literacy focus was strongly influenced by the direction and goals that were being simultaneously set by the central office. The unwavering attention to instruction mirrored Alvarado's primary principle for systemic reform. "It's about instruction and only instruction" (p. 8, Elmore & Burney, 1997). More specifically, the principals' decision to begin community-building with attention to issues of instruction reflects district leaders' beliefs (as reflected in the opening paraphrase) that community-building has to be "around something." Communities gel around a set of common, work-related commitments, values and goals. If teachers and administrators share an instructional vision, a language for talking about that vision, and a road map for getting there, they will gradually develop a healthy, mutual interdependence. Without such common, work-related commitments, community building will degenerate into community building for the sake of community building.

The schools' early embrace of a literacy focus also followed the district's identification of the improvement of students' performance on citywide tests of reading achievement as their first systemic goal. Each school, especially those with poor performance records on these examinations, was expected to concentrate on improvements in this area. As part of their push in this area, the district initiated study groups of principals and staff developers who worked side-by-side to develop a deep understanding of the process of learning-to-read and ways in which classroom instruction could foster that process. As such, the case-study principals were being steeped in a literacy culture at the district level.

Deprivatizing Instructional Practice

The focus on instruction demanded more than *talking about* instruction. School-wide improvement of instruction also demanded the *doing of* instruction in settings that were open to sharing, modeling, coaching, and, eventually, critique and feedback, in essence, *deprivatizing* the practice of teaching. As members of the district leadership community, the principals had experienced the benefits of deprivatizing the work of principals. They regularly attended monthly principal meetings, most of which were held in one of the

district's schools. These meetings included school-based presentations and tours by the hosting principal, thereby opening up the practice of "principalship."

In order to open up the practice of "teaching" within their own schools, all three principals faced the task of dismantling the high walls of privacy that surrounded the classrooms in their buildings. Not unlike their counterparts across the country, the teachers in these schools had grown accustomed to complete control over the events occurring inside their classroom doors. Knowing that it was essential that teachers become comfortable opening up their practice to each other and to staff developers, the principals worked hard to gain teachers' cooperation, treating the task as a delicate, yet solvable problem.

All three principals' solutions involved an initial emphasis on increasing the coherence of cross-grade work. One principal instituted multi-grade classrooms. Another hired an art teacher whose role it was to actively work with all the teachers to identify common themes that could serve as a thread through an emerging interdisciplinary school-wide curriculum. The third principal utilized an existing cross-grade tutoring program to initially get teachers into each others' classrooms; this was followed by cross-grade conferences to identify expected student learning outcomes grade-by-grade. In all cases, the speed with which teachers were expected to open up their practice was synchronized with teachers' growing self-confidence, and partial steps to full deprivatization were visible to teachers as they contemplated inviting others into their classrooms.

Given these principals' agendas of instructional improvement, the deprivatization of instructional practice needed to move beyond cross-grade sharing and articulation, however, and make headway into the areas of modeling, coaching, and, eventually, the critique of individual teacher's practice. Thus, *sharing* one's practice was viewed as only the first step to seriously working on instructional improvement. Without a rigorous follow-up discussion regarding how to effectively demonstrate, coach, and critique practice, simply sharing one's practice is likely to become a perfunctory event.

In these schools, movement to this next phase of deprivatization was greatly eased by the overall culture of the district which stressed that everyone is a learner. The message was clear and consistent: It is all right to have less-than-perfect performance; the important thing is to adopt the stance of a learner so that improvement is possible. In District #2, being a learner referred primarily to learning how to become an exemplary teacher of literacy. This commitment to exemplary literacy practice actually may have quickened the

productiveness of classroom observations because it provided an immediate focus to the work. Finally, the schools' location within the infrastructure of expertise that was being developed within the broader District #2 community provided a rich pool of resources for the modeling of good practice.

Investment in Building Teacher Capacity

Two things stand out regarding the ways in which these schools supported the professional growth of their teachers: The degree to which the support was grounded in day-to-day practice and the intermingling of personal and school-level objectives for professional growth. The first characteristic has becoming increasingly recognized and understood as an essential feature of effective staff development. The importance of the second is just beginning to be recognized as it has become increasingly popular to think about the unit of educational change as larger than the individual teacher (e.g., a school or a district).

Grounded Professional Development. The manner in which professional development plays out at the district leadership level has been characterized by Elmore as the folding of professional development into the ongoing work of all leaders. Rather than being relegated to a special department, professional development is seen as everybody's job. The manner in which professional development played out at each of these schools can been seen as a mirror of that image. Everybody, from the principal to part-time teachers, came to view themselves as responsible for their own learning and the learning of their colleagues. Unlike the professional development that occurs in most districts, professional development in the case-study schools did not take place in isolated venues, but rather as part and parcel of everyday work. A more experienced teacher helps another teacher set up her classroom library, a staff developer models how to conduct a guided reading group, the principal of another school visits and offers suggestions for how to make more productive use of push-in teachers. All of these examples illustrate opportunities for learning that are job-embedded rather than what Loucks-Horsley (1995) has referred to as "pull-out" training.

The case studies point to an underlying characteristic of the principals that enabled this grounded approach to professional development to work: all three principals knew the instructional strengths and weaknesses of each individual teacher and they knew the subject area of literacy well (often attending district-sponsored workshops along with their

teachers). This enabled them to direct the appropriate level and kind of assistance to individual teachers.

Building Individual *and* Collective Capacity. Traditionally, teacher professional development has been viewed as an investment based almost exclusively on self-identified needs or professional objectives. Operating for the most part independently, most teachers routinely select from a district-published menu of offerings those training sessions which are most appealing. In contrast, the professional development that was observed in these three schools assumed a dual objective: individual teacher development and furthering the collective capacity of the school to better meet the literacy needs of their students.

When sessions were held off-site (e.g., district-sponsored training in the Balanced Literacy Program, a visit to another school), teachers in the case study schools were likely to attend as a team, rather than individually. And when returning to their school, they found a welcoming place for their newly learned ideas and skills. For example, it would be likely that the teachers next door had already attended the same workshop. Conversations with these teachers, as well as observations of their practice, would help the teachers make the transition from workshop-setting to classroom. Moreover, there was a community-based expectation that they would implement the newly learned practices in their daily work. In other words, the collective focus of the school-based community supplied the setting and the motivation for applying newly learned skills, thereby greatly ameliorating the ubiquitous transfer problem.

Membership

> You will be judged as a principal by the staff you leave in place (Superintendent Alvarado, as quoted in Johnston & Levine, p. 23)

As suggested by the above quotation, District #2 principals are held accountable for assembling competent and dependable teaching staffs. When the three case-study principals took over their schools, they faced many challenges in this regard. Not only did they need to attract and train new talent, they also needed to encourage the exodus of teachers who were not interested in or capable of meeting the needs of children. After poorly performing teachers had been given ample opportunity to take advantage of training opportunities and improve their practice, if change was not forthcoming, the principals—

with the encouragement and support of district leaders—would begin considering options to remove the teachers. Several strategies were used: counseling into early retirement, transfer out of the district, reassignment to less child-intensive responsibilities within the school, and unsatisfactory ratings leading to dismissal.

One of the case study principals was known district-wide for her effective teacher recruitment strategies. These included maintaining a good network with teacher education institutions, and carefully scrutinizing substitute and student teachers to assess whether they might fit into the emerging community. Another case study principal had placed a lot of effort into the design of a group-based interview process for prospective hires.

The teachers who ended up remaining in these three schools, along with newly hired teachers, are held accountable for continuous learning and effortful performance. As such, community membership *implies* opportunity *and* obligation. The district stresses that the need for continuous learning cannot be seen as the exclusive province of a few "stars" or struggling teachers, but rather must be seen as a community-based norm applicable to all.

Establishing a Community Based Identity

At the time of the case studies, each of the schools had been successfully functioning as a learning community for several years. Teachers from all of the schools expressed a great deal of self-awareness about the fact that they were working in a school that was different from most schools. In my judgment, the catalyst for their development of this self-consciousness as members of a professional learning community was the fact that they were often called upon by others to demonstrate and to explain what they were doing. Initially, they were asked to display and explain what they were doing to district leaders. As the district matured, these schools began hosting many visitors from other district schools, as well as visitors from schools outside their immediate community district.

Preparing for and going through the process of self-description for individuals outside your community, can be a very powerful experience—one that can have a synergistic effect on a community's developing identity. In the process of preparing for and conducting tours or presentations, teachers and the principal need to interpret the specifics of their practice in terms of the general principles for which they claim to stand. For example, in what ways do weekly grade-level teacher meetings contribute to community? How does the identification of rubrics for student performance add to the clarity and rigor of their

community's standards? By conducting many such presentations and tours, the teachers and principals of these three schools have been forced to clarify what they stand for and to identify what aspect of their work best serves as evidence for their community's principles.

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District #2 has been successful in supporting a complex vision of teacher development—one that is based on teachers' acquiring the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of expert practitioners, as opposed to their acquiring a technician's bag of tricks. A little-understood effect of the district has been the manner in which its leaders have been able to establish an overarching focus on literacy and pursue the goal of widespread adoption of effective literacy practices *without* imposing a one-size-fits all structure on teacher learning and development. A large part of the answer to how they have been able to do this, in my judgment, rests on the existence of professional learning communities in individual schools—communities like those that have been described in the three case studies. These communities present a mosaic of kinds and levels of work, participation in which leads to increasing teacher competence. As teachers progress to more difficult and central forms of work within their communities, they "stretch" themselves in ways that are harmonious with their degree of preparedness and their community's needs.

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